# In Memoriam

"No hand is big enough to grasp the Truth, but no hand is too small to point to it." -- Sri Vyaktananda

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Terrence Oldham Barnes (1922-2000), also known during his lifetime, to a select few, as Sri Vyaktananda, was born in Ada, Oklahoma, but lived the last 54 years of his life in the San Francisco Bay area suburb of El Cerrito. He spent his entire professional life as a science teacher for what is now the West Contra Costa Unified School District. Though he and his wife of 48 years, Minnie, never had any children of their own they were important friends, even parental surrogates, for many children over the course of their long lives.

The Barnes' lifelong interest in Judaeo-Christo-Islamic mysticism and the Eastern religions led to them hosting at their home an informal discussion group on every other Thursday evening. This group, which now continues under the sobriquet Vyaktananda Society, was led by Terry and Minnie, and then just Terry, for over twenty-five years. Terry got the alias Sri Vyaktananda as a joke one evening when he kept persistently holding forth on the theme of bliss. Someone made a comment to the effect that the individual determines what bliss is. "Do you know what the individual is?", asked Terry. The question was asked right back at him. He answered, "Bliss." with the kind of smile which convinced those present that he knew whereof he spoke. As a result of this occasion our resident Hindu scholar came up with the honorific Sri Vyaktananda to describe our host (*vyakta* is the individual manifestation and *ananda* is bliss) and from then on we teased him with it until finally it just stuck, and even Terry starting referring to himself by it.

After Terry's body died (his spirit lives on in us) a slim well-worn notebook was discovered among his effects. It contained a few short essays, but mostly it was filled with brief reflections, little aphorisms, and poems that reflected a lot of what we had come to know in our direct experience of him. The Vyaktananda Society decided to edit and arrange some of the material from this notebook and publish it here.

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"Looked at one way, the cause of this 'illusion' of individuality is ignorance; looked at another way, it's love." -- Sri Vyaktananda

# Selections from the notebook of Sri Vyaktananda

## by Terrence Oldham Barnes

### edited by Robert P. Meizer

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***[EDITORIAL NOTE: This concise collection derives from one three-quarter filled notebook (9" X 6") found among the late Terry Barnes' effects. Terry had terrible handwriting, and he probably never expected any of his scribblings to be published. He had talked about all of these ideas, even used some of these exact phrases, in interactions with his friends and students over a period of many years, which made the deciphering of his chicken scratches at least possible. Here is published everything that could be confidently made out, about two-thirds of the original manuscript. The items in the Poems & Aphorisms are arranged in the order of the original manuscript, and thus are presumably from earliest to latest (except for the aphorisms which, though all together on two separate pages, were clearly not all written at the same time). Some spelling and grammar in the Essays & Reflections has been standardized by the present editor, and its items are arranged by size, shortest to longest. Editorial notes in the text are bracketed and labeled just like this one.]***

* * *

"How do you let go of everything without letting go of anything?" -- Sri Vyaktananda

# Selections from the notebook of Sri Vyaktananda

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## Poems & Aphorisms

### FIND

you find the way to god
in each and all tradition
you find the way to peace
in every path you trod

you find the way to emptiness
you find the way to void
you find the way to overcome
your mind, and look at god

you find the way, and not a way
you find yourself is lost
and all you find is destiny
and all that is is fraud

you find the way, yet not the way
you face no future, know no past
you find the way, and know its cost:
your mind to look at god

* * *

### ADVICE TO WOULD-BE MESSIAHS

Give all
Expect nothing

* * *

### MY FAITH

There is no place in the desert
to hide from the sun.
There is no way to shelter
in the shade of your own shadow.
If all that is is form, if empty
representations are all that exist
then I can never know my own
non-existence, nor is anything
communicated by the word of
"void".
A poem begins in silence,
in silence it ends,
how very like my universe.

* * *

### INVITATION TO SADHANA

Have at that silent hill,
that 'not' which cradles the numberless words.
Meditation, populous as slumbers and fluttering with form,
give me a mirror and show me how to watch.

* * *

### I LIKE RAIN

The search for realisation is empty
Let the final suffering be
The givens are all one

* * *

where you see a coffin
dead men see nothing

* * *

when an eagle nears the sun
all we see is its shadow

* * *

Dualism's dumb.
Monism's moronic.
Nihilism's nuts.
What's a philosopher to do?

* * *

on Bali
shadows are used to enlighten

* * *

A watched pot may never boil, but an unwatched pot is liable to boil over.

* * *

Growth is the process of recovering from what everyone else thinks you are.

* * *

Elitists always think themselves the cream floating atop the fresh milk of equity when they are usually just the scum that forms upon the stagnant water of privilege.

* * *

I've never understood those people who are surprised to find that irrationality doesn't make sense.

* * *

### KOAN FOR JUGGLERS

How do you let go of everything without letting go of anything?

* * *

### PIECED TOGETHER OUT OF OLD DISCONTINUOUS MOMENTS LIKE NOW

Buddha said find
out for yourself

so people came and
asked him how to do it

history repeats itself (but not as
often as you hear that repeated)

the smell of a rose does
not replace its roots

* * *

The unmanifest contains the manifest, but the manifest does not contain the unmanifest.

* * *

The struggle to be something is unnecessary.

The struggle to not be something is a positive evil.

* * *

Freedom lies not in the ability to do whatever you want, but rather in the capacity to want whatever you do.

* * *

Looked at one way, the cause of this 'illusion' of individuality is ignorance; looked at another way, it's love.

* * *

That indifference does nothing is no surprise.

That love does nothing but balance out the indifference is not expected.

* * *

### HOW TO LIVE AS A SINGLE NATURAL BEING
(For Charles Olson)

Breathe in and out but live in the space between breaths.

Let your thoughts be breaths and find the space between.

Eat breakfast with friends, and love your enemies because they offer you the opportunity to triumph over them.

Thereafter, benign indifference is the best revenge.

Take a long walk every day even if only in your mind.

Study yourself constantly, but believe yourself never.

Forget whatever you can.

* * *

Everything that happens, happens; everything that doesn't happen, doesn't happen.

* * *

### THE ONLY POEM

How can you ever hope to explain the unexplainable?
You may as well try to give voice to the ineffable.
Far better to speak about the sourgrass in bloom.
Its iridescent yellow flowers bright as day.

* * *

There is no revenge against those who laugh at death.

* * *

~finis~

# Selections from the notebook of Sri Vyaktananda

## by Terrence Oldham Barnes

### edited by Robert P. Meizer

# Essays & Reflections

* * *

You say 'I am thinking', 'I am sensing', 'I am experiencing', so you cannot be those thoughts, sensations, or experiences. But what are you then? Who is that I that thinks, senses, and experiences? The answer is neither a thought, a sensation, nor an experience.

* * *

I know that the universe exists only because I am conscious of it. I know that I exist only because I am conscious of myself. I know that consciousness exists only because I am conscious. So what is the difference between "I" and consciousness? or "I" and the universe? or "I" and you?

* * *

I experience existence as ultimately a unity (what Kabbalists call the Sephira Kether). It is a highly philosophical concept at best, something along the lines of 'the substrate of consciousness', and in the end nothing can truly be known or said about it, it cannot even be truly experienced, as it is experiencing itself.

* * *

That which cannot be said, must therefore be said, nay, shouted from the very pinnacles of our dwelling places, "Thou art That, and That am I!" Worship of the ego is only possible where worship ceases to exist. You are what you do when you do what you must. Becoming is the realization of already having been, and being is the experience of everything you are not.

* * *

I do not entirely condemn self-delusion; we all must daily (if intermittently) believe in numerous convenient lies in order to fulfill our social roles while still preserving the integrity of our individual identities. Certainly these kinds of self-deceptions may at times make us appear foolish to others, but truly serious danger enters in only if we begin to attribute some sort of absolute significance to our own opinions and projections.

* * *

Time is both analog and digital. We experience it as seamless, continuous, an unbroken string of eternal nows, first it's to come, then it's here, then gone, yet it's never really separate from all the other moments on the timeline. This is true, though we can just as easily visualize time as a succession of discontinuous flashes, like the points on a line. And just as with points, there is always a now between any other two nows, which is nonetheless discrete, individual, and different from any other now. That is why all this talk of new millennia, of eras, of ages, of aeons, while it speaks so powerfully on the level of metaphor is, strictly speaking, nonsense.

* * *

The point, in fact, is where every thing begins. In Euclidean geometry it's the pure quality of position, without dimension, infinitely divisible, ubiquitously present. A point is the vanishingly small foundation of infinite space.
In consciousness, too, this point takes its place, as the space/time phenomenon of now/here which is the subject of the subject/object experience. Built up by perception and memory this point of awareness becomes a personality. What this personality becomes is demonstrated by the events in which it participates.
One who participates in the event of reading this is also thereby participating in all the events incidental to its being written. Most of these events are forever unknowable to both the reader and the author.

* * *

A THANKSGIVING THOUGHT

Whenever I pretend to believe in reincarnation I'm forced to wonder what I did in lifetimes past that I should be so blessed in this particular incarnation—I've never gone hungry except by choice, I've never had to live on the streets even when I've been homeless, I've never had anger or hatred hold onto me for all that long (though longer than healthy sometimes). Yet nothing about all this is my doing! It's just a blessing that I don't deserve or understand, but yet appreciate. I thank the Supreme Reality which is unaware of all that It has given me. I hope that as much may be given to all those of whom I am aware or unaware.

* * *

Only the most mature and well-integrated of students could ever hope to master themselves without at times being overcome by emotion. People who enter this path of realization with the baggage of guilt, shame, anger, or any other neurotic burden must learn to drop it all by the wayside, if they wish to attain. This emotional liberation is virtually synonymous with success. On the one hand emotions must be allowed to arise and must be experienced fully if they are ever to be brought under one's sway, on the other hand no significant actions should ever be undertaken without due regard for their foreseeable consequences. Walking this tightrope takes time for most of us to learn. A selfless attitude, while trusting above all in oneself, is the only real safety net.

* * *

I do not ask that anyone agree with any of my myriad opinions and beliefs. My opinions and beliefs are indeed a part of me, but they are not me. Even I myself, by myself, am not me. In the words of Ortega y Gasset, "I am I, and my circumstances" (unlike the smug egotist, who with his deluded and partial "I am I" is ever the slave of circumstances). So, included in me is the entire context in which I occur, and as some of that context is always beyond the horizon of my conscious perception I must therefore be compounded, in some part, of mystery. We generally go through life fooling ourselves that we can know other people when in fact we can't even know how much we know of ourselves.

* * *

Dreams arise when the body and mind are asleep. They are usually experienced as if they were "real", that is, like the waking state in being ultimately beyond purely individual conscious control. But occasionally a dream is experienced wherein the dreamer realizes that she or he is dreaming; this breaks the illusion of "objectivity" and whatever is experienced in the dream is recognized as a part of the dreamer.
The Absolute is asleep to itself, and thus the world of phenomena arises as its dream. The body/mind phenomenon is the Absolute's appearance within this dream. Usually it takes itself to be "real", but when the Absolute awakes the body/mind is shown as the illusion which it is. This happens whenever the body/mind dies. The question is whether or not the Absolute realizes that it is dreaming while this dream of life is still going on.

* * *

The kernel of the Tantric tradition is an understanding of the human body as more than merely meat, gristle, blood, and juices. We also have bodies of nerve, mind, and spirit. The essence of the Tantric method is the use of the physical senses, the breath, and the sexual energy, to achieve the higher levels of spiritual, as opposed to mere physical, ecstasy. As with every other tradition of enlightenment the specific techniques of Tantric meditation, mantra, and ritual are most easily learned directly from an experienced practitioner, though very valuable guidance may also be found in the writings of various teachers and scholars. Keep it in mind that no book or teacher, per se, can "Enlighten" you; it is only by, in, and through a process of progressively merging the internal and external that one among many can find its peace and rest in that duality which is nonbeing in being.

* * *

A TALE DERIVED FROM THE DAOIST *CLASSIC OF COMPLETE EMPTINESS*:
*[**EDITORIAL NOTE**: usually called the "Lieh-Tzu"]*

A man went hunting in the thick wilderness. He set fire to the woods in order to stampede the animals, while he waited by a cliff face to cut them down as they emerged from the trees. Suddenly he saw an old man, naked and filthy, walk straight out of the rock and continue right on into the burning forest, entirely oblivious. The hunter, curiosity conquering fear, nimbly followed after him, just in time to see the old man step unscathed out of a roaring pyre. Catching up, the hunter asked him, "Tell me, sir, how is it that you can walk through solid rock?"
"Rock? What do you mean by rock?", answered the old man as he continued his march.
"And you can also walk through fire!"
"Fire? What is fire?"
And then the old man, unable to distinguish anything at all, walked directly into a nearby lake, and quickly disappeared beneath its muddy waters.

* * *

"religious experiences" vs. The Religious Experience—how are they related, if at all? Visions, dreams, trances, altered states, are among those events, witnessed or remembered as describable collections of somatic impressions, which may be termed "religious experiences". The Religious Experience is a much tougher cookie to bake, and then it ends up eating you! The unfettered operation of unbiased reason leads eventually to the recognition that reason is entirely inadequate to answer many of the most important questions of human life (though it is quite admirably suited to the creation of technological comfort, and the exploration of the physical realm of existence). This wordless Religious Experience, which is not an experience, not an event (though the realization of it may appear as an event to those individuals who witness its seeming echoes in the life of another individual), this soundless sound, as it has been described in that peculiarly forthright form of poetic contradiction which is native to all the greatest mystics across all boundaries of faith, nation, or era, this dualistic nothingness, is as pointless to talk about as to leave unsaid.

* * *

The endless expanse of space, the boundless duration of time, these are the spirits of this matter. But all is paradox; how can this unspeakable word be uttered? how can we, frail, pathetic, finite beings as we are, exist? And the answer comes, we do not exist! Any more than a shadow exists. And how do we find the light? Look past the obstruction which creates the illusion of shadow. There you will see Light.
Don't kid yourself, success, fame, fortune, love & lust, every human desire, is as nothing compared to that Light. The vast majority of humankind wastes its toil & tears, wastes its seemingly limited years in a struggle for what is only ashes left behind by the fiery demise of unutterable truth. If you are listening to me then you do not hear; if you see these things then you are blind; if you have ever lived then you are death itself. But grieve not, because in fleeting eternal moments, points in time, events in space, the end of all happening is already being born, dying, dries up, and blew away long before you were aware. The dance of polar opposites makes up its own music as it goes; man & woman, friend and foe, self & other, I & thou—these are mysteries which everyone understands.

* * *

The breath is life itself. Each breath can be considered a microcosm of the expansion and contraction through which all existence travels from the nonbeing of all potential (the Buddhist's "void of forms", the Kabbalist's "da'at", the physicist's empty space awash with "virtual particles", etc.) to the being of all manifestation, and back again, fulfilling all possibilities, including all their contradictions. Thus there are as many ways of inhalation and exhalation as there are ways of living and dying. And just as no one style of life or death is suitable for every individual, there is no one way of breathing which is intrinsically better than all the others. A slow, full, and deep state of breath might be very appropriate during meditation for instance, but be totally out of place while riding through the polluted streets of our cities. A rapid, partial, and shallow state of breath might be very useful for certain yogic exercises yet be quite out of place while hiking through mountain forests. A breath practice that energizes isn't usually a good idea just before bedtime; a calming breath practice may not be appropriate to one's wake-up regimen (of course, one can only discover what is best for oneself by extensive experimentation). It's a good sign that you have a healthy style of breathing when your breath moves freely from state to state as required by circumstances. It is wise to develop this healthy style of breathing if you wish to fully enjoy the gifts of life.

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I remember that one of my favorite books in the early 60's was a thin volume of speculations on the existence and nature of extraterrestrial life written by Carl Sagan *[**EDITORIAL NOTE**: probably "Organic matter and the moon", 1961, but possibly "The atmospheres of Mars and Venus", 1962, or even "Planets", 1966]*. He was certainly one of those leading scientists who are also excellent communicators and/or popularizers (like Darwin, Einstein, Hawking, and Gould, to name a few), and I respect his belief in applying the scientific method. It never hurts to subject experience to rigorous analysis; on the other hand, however, it doesn't always really help, and in those cases I'm perfectly willing to be unscientific. I suspect that Carl was also this way, whether or not he would have actually admitted it. It takes much more than reason to live a full human life, and the rules of our emotional games, or of our creative games, or our prophetic games, are each quite uniquely different from the rules of our logical games. An excellent book on this subject (though without the author necessarily knowing it) is *Stairway To The Mind* by Alwyn Scott *[**EDITORIAL NOTE**: "Stairway to the mind : the controversial new science of consciousness", 1995]*. He examines consciousness at various levels, quantum, molecular, neurophysiological, psychological, cultural, and believes he can discern an underlying theme. Though each level is expressible in terms of relationships to the levels above or below there are also at each level certain determining factors (constants) which may not be derived by computation from the other levels, but may only be found by empirical measurement on the level concerned. This same insight is expressed in the parlance of occultism as "Don't mix up the planes!".

* * *

A credo, or creed, is a formalized statement of religious beliefs, an 'authorized' profession of faith describing some particular church's main principles. Though such statements are not at all required by the religious quest for (re)union with the source of all being, they often do seem to be required by the social quest for individual and group definitions. I know of no evidence to indicate that an obligatory credo was enunciated by any of the shamanic traditions among our hunting & gathering ancestors. Still, it seems clear that as societies increased in population and technological mastery their religions became more organized, and developed into permanent social institutions. They eventually collected sets of 'orthodox' beliefs, often making a formal confession of these beliefs into a pro forma part of religious observance. The more that a religious group is a social movement (as opposed to a technology for individuals to experience divinity) the more importance it usually places upon the acceptance of a specific credo. This tendency is at its most extreme in religions which are also 'complete' social systems, e.g., Islam, where the first of the five essential duties of every Muslim is to profess the shahada ("la ilaha illa'llah muhammadun rasulu'llah" which means, roughly, "there is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet"). In the history of Western culture the major political points at issue have often involved one of the many significant formulations of religious belief. The famous Nicene Creed, developed once the Catholic Church had consolidated its control of the Roman Empire, and the Augsburg Confession, which defined Lutheran practice, both clearly demonstrate that credos were often determined, not by abstract theology, but in order to meet the evolving exigencies of practical political and cultural conflict. Formal credos are most often identified with highly organized, socially active, and group-oriented religious movements. The solitary mystic has no need of credos, and may in fact be entirely silent, but still these two extremes are intimate companions. The Night of Power transformed a man alone in a mountain cave into a new king of credos whose articles of faith are now conformed to by hundreds of millions. Prophets, priests, and mystics may be as different as horns, hooves, and testicles, but they're all part of the same Holy Bull.

* * *

Throughout this human history it seems that there have always been some amongst us who have sought for conscious explanations of the existence and nature of consciousness itself. In one sense this search for an understanding of mind is the driving force behind much of human mythology, religion, philosophy, creative and performing arts. Specifically, what underpins the entire endeavor of philosophy from Protagoras and Plato to Berkeley, Kant, and Wittgenstein, is a philosophers' use of logical tools to analyze the process whereby the human animal acquires and uses such tools as logic and knowledge in the first place. Within this area of speculation we may discern a great variety of systematic approaches which might all be termed psychological paradigms. The paradigm is a logical construction which attempts to describe the organization and functioning of the human mind. Perhaps the most complete systems of this type are a product of Buddhist speculation, but in the West the works of both Hegel and those he greatly influenced (e.g., Marx) on the one hand, and of Freud and those he greatly influenced (e.g., Jung) on the other, have produced the most ramified theories of human psychological functioning. Many modern psychologists, whether they recognize Freud as a founding father or not, have still been influenced by his terminology, and even some of those who have rejected the use of words like 'id', 'libido', 'ego', 'superego', etc. to describe the workings of the human mind are yet hard put to avoid the assumption that some psychological processes occur without our consciousness of them. Even something so simple as the sudden recollection of long-forgotten memories implies the existence of a non-conscious filing and retrieval system which is far from being completely controlled by most human beings' conscious minds. Thus one or both of the terms 'subconscious' and 'unconscious' are widely used by modern psychologists, though the exact definitions of them are almost as widely debated. For the time being let us put aside exact definitions and be content with the premise that a part of our human mind exists which is operating without our conscious knowledge and direction. Psychologists in the late nineteenth century came to believe that it is this non-conscious section of our minds which controls our conscious mind's ability to perceive stimuli, both internal and external. By observing responses of subjects to various stimuli they found that a threshold of intensity or duration exists below which the conscious mind does not perceive a stimulus (e.g., a sound or an image). The exact location of the threshold could even be varied according to the subject's direction and intensity of attention. The adjective which Anglophone psychologists coined to describe stimuli which are below the threshold of conscious attention was 'subliminal'. These early researchers established that there are many things we see and hear around us of which we are not consciously aware. More recently, studies by neurophysiologists have shown that minute stimuli which cannot be discerned consciously, even by an alert and forewarned subject, are nevertheless perceived and cause activity within the subject's brain (see Dixon, N. *Preconscious Processing* New York: Wiley 1981). This means that we are not only receiving information from our environment in the form of sense impressions to which we pay no conscious attention, but that we are also all constantly picking up on and responding to stimuli which even the most concentrated and perceptive observer cannot detect. The fact that subliminal perception is a normal part of our behavior, even in deep sleep, is beyond doubt scientifically, but the question then becomes: how exactly does one's brain process and utilize the information which it perceives subliminally?
The only way to answer that question is with scientific research. Unfortunately, psychology in our day is much like chemistry was in the era of Cavendish, Priestley, and Lavoisier, when the principles of scientific experimentation and observation were already pretty well established, but the scientists' tools for quantitative measurement and analysis were still limited and often inaccurate. Nonetheless, studies which have been undertaken to determine whether human behavior can be affected by subliminally perceived information have indicated that indeed such subliminal suggestion can affect human performance in areas as diverse as memory, concentration, relaxation, psychotherapy, weight loss, prisoner rehabilitation, and even dart-throwing! (see Silverman, L.H., et al., in "Journal of Abnormal Psychology" v.87, 1978) In spite of the accumulation of a growing body of evidence that subliminal suggestion (more often called 'subliminal communication' by its practitioners) actually does to some extent affect the human consciousness there has yet to be developed a promising theory of the functional mechanisms involved in the subliminal process. How is the non-conscious mind organized? Is there a personal subconscious and a collective unconscious, as Jung described? Or is there Neschamah, the super-soul (or higher, i.e., creative, unconscious mind), and Ruach, the spirit (or conscious and subconscious minds), and Nephesh, the vital soul (or lower, i.e., autonomic, unconscious mind), as the Kabbalists would have it? So far humanity has yet to answer any of these questions scientifically. The best approximation to date is in the work of Milton Erickson, one of the founders of the field of clinical hypnotherapy, yet even he sounds a cautionary note for anyone who thinks that the present day field of psychology has already developed a firm scientific basis, "It is satisfying personally to offer theories and hypotheses, but it would be so much better to investigate actual phenomena. Research should be centered around phenomena, not around achieving fame by placing in the literature a well-argued theory intended to 'explain' some unexamined manifestation." (quoted from "Basic psychological problems in hypnotic research" in Estabrooks, G., Hypnosis: Current Problems, New York, Harper & Row, 1962 pp.207-223)

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In the final volume of his classic survey of mythology, *The Masks Of God* (Vol.IV, Creative Mythology), Joseph Campbell writes pointedly, perceptively, and repeatedly, of "the popular mistake of reading mythology as a reference to hard historic fact". Though the results of this mistake can be extremely severe, the fact that this confusion between metaphor and literal truth does indeed take place is not altogether surprising when we consider that, while most words, by definition, have an explicit meaning, the very method of metaphor is to use words in a figurative and implicit rather than a literal way. Since it is not the word that one uses but rather the thought which another person understands by it which ultimately determines the actual meaning of a communication it is only natural that the understanding of metaphorical communication would require a certain set of life experiences, just as the correct apprehension of any literal definition presupposes some knowledge that is ultimately based upon experience.
Therefore, with metaphors it is not the specific vocabulary, but rather the context, which is all-important. When I tell my beloved that I want to eat her I am not confessing to a weakness for cannibalism. And if I am speaking in the context of a mutual romantic attraction then she is quite unlikely to run away from me in terror (unless she's had remarkably few experiences with the metaphorical use of language). In a completely different context, we have the story of Mary's virginity at the time of Jesus' birth, which is only the ludicrous lie it appears to be when it is considered as a narrative of fact, while if, on the other hand, we consider Mary (like Cybele or Isis) as a type of the 'Great Mother Goddess' of nature, and Jesus (like Attis or Osiris) as a type of the 'Dying and Resurrected God' of vegetal and other life, then the biblical story could become an enlightening, even liberating, metaphor of the cyclical processes in humanity's physical and psychological existence.
The confusion between the metaphorical and the mundane is especially frequent in the context of religious thought for at least two different reasons. Firstly, most, if not all, significant religious experiences are described as, in some respect, ineffable (that is, not expressible in words). When literal description is impossible, and yet one still feels compelled to speak about one's moments of revelation, then metaphor is the only possible vehicle for verbal communication. Perhaps, on occasion, there will be a few people in some realized one's audience who have had similar (or at least preparatory) experiences, and will recognize (or at least ponder) what is being said, but certainly most people, having no first-hand basis for understanding, will either quickly reject it as utter nonsense or, much worse, credulously accept the metaphor as a literal truth.
Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, in many religious contexts there are obvious social motives for people to maintain that particular religious metaphors are factual statements. If Jesus is an archetypal myth rather than a historical personage then how does one justify the enforcement of his worship to the exclusion of all others, especially when some of the other archetypes (e.g., Dionysus, Orpheus, Mithras, etc.) are somewhat similar? In societies where religious literalism acts as an important justification for the dominant position of particular individuals and classes it has almost invariably been a capital offense to question the mundane truth of received wisdom. Although mystics may teach that the popular religious tradition has a metaphorical significance which may even outweigh the importance of its literal truth, they will do so at their own, often substantial, risk. Even in our so-called enlightened society, there are many Christian denominations wherein theologians who question the historical details of the gospels are liable to lose their jobs, and may even face ostracism and harassment.
At its most extreme this 'historicization' of myth even manages to entirely displace the original mystical metaphor. For example, the passage in Matthew's gospel where Jesus gives Peter the "keys of the kingdom" is redolent with meaning to mystics and hermeticists of many stripes, but in the hands of the Roman Catholic authorities this story has been robbed of its inner veracity and reduced to a mere pretext for theocratic tyranny. At some later point, after the gospels were written, Peter was credited with being the first bishop of Rome by the early Christian community. As there is, to me, no discernible mystical metaphor involved in such an elaboration of the legend it must be either based upon actual fact (a highly dubious premise) or a fiction invented to add weight to the papal claims of universal sovereignty.
Despite the social embarrassments and physical risks insightful mystics throughout the ages have understood and appreciated the crucial differences and interfaces between the metaphors of eternity and the actualities of space-time. In today's milieu, for instance, it is possible (though not, alas, ordinary) for a person to find great psychological value in 'out-of-body' or 'near-death' experiences, 'past-life' or 'precognitive' visions, and yet still not become a true believer in 'astral planes', 'the afterlife', 'reincarnation', or 'akashic records'. However, it is usually far more common to find people (including the most hard-core of skeptics) being seduced by their desires and assumptions into mistaking the 'four-dimensional' signs and symbols of their experiential map for the 'five, six, or whatever-dimensional' reality of the territory which they actually inhabit.
The most authentic of sacred revelations are necessarily viewed in the distorted mirror of individual (and hence, social) consciousness. Muhammad had no acquaintance with concepts like "archetypes of the collective unconscious"; for him, his dictation sessions with the angel Gabriel had an entirely explicit meaning. It is therefore only natural that most of his followers to this day insist upon the literal truth of an eternal Qur'an. That Islam could also produce a mystic theologian like Ibn al-Arabi is also only natural when one considers that authentic mystical experience is not to be captured by words, ideas, or even entire cultural establishments.

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